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MONTANA OUTDOORS

Our Point of View

There are still many places where one can stand in Montana's open spaces and slip back in time—to imagine an Indian encampment, a cattle drive, or simply listen to chirping birds and the rustle of wind. For many of us, it's hard to imagine the land being any different. In many of these places, it is difficult to know where private land starts and public land ends.

Yet we know the landscape is changing rapidly as subdivisions replace wheat fields and once-open foothills. And with two-thirds of Montana in private ownership, the possibility of even more dramatic change is very real.

When I became director in 1993, an important tool to help us address this change was locked up in a legislative committee. "Boys," the legislators said, "You aren't buying any more land." They were concerned that a loss of rural landowners would adversely affect the local economy and tax base.

RODNEY SCHLECHT

We responded by pledging to use our funds to acquire conservation easements instead of fee title to the land whenever feasible. These easements are working partnerships where the landowner gets paid to give up his or her right to subdivide the land and agrees to conserve land and wildlife values, thus maintaining a healthy range and watershed. That kind of commitment is easy for the many landowners who already practice good land stewardship.

Partnerships like those we now enjoy with the Harris Land and Cattle Company (page 23) and the Page-Whitham Land and Cattle Company (page 32) are two examples. Since 1993, we have acquired 30 easements on 145,160 acres of private land. Private land trust organizations like the Montana Land Reliance, conservation groups like The Nature Conservancy, and the federal Partners in Wildlife Program have contributed to protecting another three quarters of a million acres through easements in Montana.

In 1999 the Montana Legislature passed the Montana Agricultural Heritage Act, dedicating a million dollars for the 1999-2000 biennium to purchase of easements that will conserve agricultural land and the open space and habitat it can provide. Through these diverse programs, Montanans lead the nation in our attempt to do what so many other states have failed to do—maintain our way of life.

Patrick J. Graham, Director
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

TOM J. ULRICH

Although they are the smallest of forest carnivores, weasels pack a powerful punch (page 13).

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OPENING DA

Hunting the Heart of

By Ben Long

When you think about it, Opening Day of elk season is a lot like Christmas.

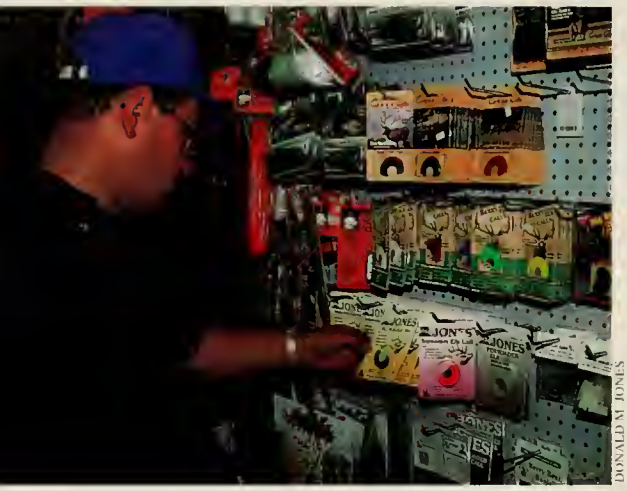
Both come once a year.

Both are best with fresh snow.

Both are blessed with profound meaning. Both are cursed with cheap commercialism.

Both include the arrival of hoofed mammals with antlers. But only if you've been good.

Tradition
DONALD M. JONES



DONALD M. JONES

For procrastinators, the Night Before Opening Day means a quick trip to the sporting goods store.

Elk season comes every October, but Opening Day still catches me off-guard. The night before elk season always finds me in the same place. I'll be in line with the rest of the procrastinators. (I see these same faces lined up at the florist's shop after work on Valentine's Day and at the Post Office at midnight every April 15.)

The Night Before Hunting Season we push shopping carts through the supermarket, piling the basket with canned chili, beef stew, and sandwich fixings. We stand at the counter of the sporting goods store, buying tags, shells, an orange vest to replace the one we've lost since last year.

We are smiling. We are excited. It is almost Opening Day.

I swear you feel the anticipation, the way you feel the zing of electricity in a coming thunderstorm.

Not all outdoor sports have an opening day. There is no official opening day for hiking, kayaking, snowmobiling, or dirt-biking. There is the opener of fishing season, but the first day I fish has more to do with spring runoff than the calendar.

The Night Before Opening Day I take my place in line. I worry about things I haven't done. I haven't scouted enough. I haven't been to the target range as often as I like. I'm not in peak physical condition. I haven't patched the leak in my camper, put fresh batteries in my flashlight, or oiled my boots.

I start to worry, as if hunting season were just another commitment.

Then, in the line ahead of me, I see them. They snap me out of my worries. They remind me of what is truly important. The kids.

I missed them at first, because they are so short. Twelve-year-old boys and girls, wearing buffalo-plaid shirts that are a size too big, holding hunter education certificates in their hands. They bounce on their heels with excitement. They rest their chin on the gun counter and buy their first hunting license.

I remember being there, decades ago. Standing next to my father, buying my first elk tag.

On Opening Day, there's a little of that in every one of us: A 12-year-old with a new rifle and a permission slip to miss three days of school. That special breed of excitement has a life of its own. It does not die.

I have this nagging question: Where does this excitement come from? This anticipation? This folklore and drama surrounding Opening Day?

Humans have hunted big game for 99 percent of their time on earth, since the days nomads chased mammoths with spears. Paleolithic hunters, of course, had no Opening Day. Opening Day was the day your family was hungry. Opening Day was the day you were born.

The same was true in the early European-American tradition. Take Lewis and Clark, for example. The Corps of Discovery ate like wolves. Literally. A day's grub consisted of eight pounds of elk meat. They fashioned clothes and shoes of elk skin. They pulled their canoes up the Missouri River using ropes of twisted elk hide. They even made a boat out of elk skins stretched over a steel frame. (The boat sank, but it wasn't the elk's fault.)

My point is, if Lewis and Clark had been forced to wait for Opening Day they never would have made it past North Dakota.

Opening Day is a recent phenomenon. It came during that thin slice of recent history when we realized we could not have it all, all at once. We realized that we could not shoot elk eleven months of the year and expect to have any left the twelfth month.

We realized that for the good of all, we would have to show some self-restraint. That's a valuable lesson these days when six billion souls share this planet, each clawing for natural resources.

Montana's first Opening Day was August 16, 1872. It kicked off a generous hunting season that stretched clear to February. Montana's tradition of Opening Day predates statehood itself. In 1872, General George A. Custer was still in uniform, millions of bison still roamed the northern plains, and the Territorial Legislature met in the thriving metropolis of Virginia City.

According to Montana State University scholar Joan L. Brownell, that first closed season was designed to protect not only elk, but also mountain bison, moose, mountain goats, bighorn sheep, antelope, and both flavors of deer. With flimsy frontier law enforcement and hordes of hungry gold prospectors, the law alone didn't stand a chance. Mere law could not protect the mountain bison or Audubon's bighorn sheep from extinction, and elk and other species from near annihilation. But it was a first step in a legal heritage that eventually rewarded modern Montana the richest wildlife resource of any state. And Opening Day has been a tradition ever since.

Statistics from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) indicate that, statistically, the first week of hunting season is when a hunter enjoys the greatest odds of taking an elk. Statewide, about 25 percent of elk taken annually are taken

MIKE BARLOW

the first week of the season. Where I live, in northwestern Montana, the numbers are even more dramatic. Here, 41 percent of the season's elk are taken the first week.

These figures made me curious about my own Opening Day success. So I did a quick statistical analysis. (Believe me, this is not difficult mathematics. I completed the problem with plenty of fingers to spare.) It turns out Opening Day has been good to me. A full 30 percent of the elk I've killed or that my hunting partners have killed have been on Opening Day.

But I do not believe that opportunity for success alone adequately explains the excitement of Opening Day. After all, I have had more Opening Days without elk than with them. No hunters I know measure "success" by counting carcasses. That is like judging the quality of Christmas by the stack of presents under the tree.

There must be something else.

My own enjoyment of Opening Day dates to my youth—as a kid, my birthday coincided with it. As a birthday present, my dad would spring me from school for an elk hunt.

Dad would pick me up from junior high school in his 1974 International Harvester pickup pulling an old rattletrap of a camp trailer. I would spy this conspicuous rig from my seat in English class, just before the school bell rang. I would then dash across the football field to climb in the pickup next to him. The drive to the mountains seemed as long as a drive to Nome.

On my 16th birthday my father and I celebrated at a place called Squaw Springs. We ate cake by Coleman lantern and went to bed early. Dawn found us looking over the shadowy backside of a mountain. We heard a distant bull bugle just after sun-up. My father bugled with his plastic whistle. The bull answered.

Our stalk was on. The mountain was steep, dark, and strewn with timber. We literally wrapped our arms around the trunks of trees simply to remain on two feet. But now and again, the bull would bugle, egging us deeper into the dark wood. After six hours we closed in.

We knew the bull was nearby, so we crouched on the edge of a glade. I saw the bull first—just a six-point rack of elk antlers floating over the stunted subalpine fir like disembodied antlers of a ghost elk. Then the rest of the bull stepped into the open and stood on the edge of a little meadow less than 50 yards from my father and me.

My father turned to me and silently mouthed the word: *shoot!*

I didn't shoot. I didn't even move. I was locked in a paralytic case of bull fever.

Somehow, the bull sensed something was amiss. My dad shot quickly and dropped the elk as it turned to flee. It took us three days to pack out the meat, hide, and antlers.

At the game check station, the biologist pulled a tooth from the elk's jaw, checked the tag number to my dad's license, and admired the antlers. When he was done, he slapped my back.

"Ah well," he said, "maybe next year will be your turn."

He said it like he suspected I was disappointed. But I already had the best birthday of my life, and I knew it. I don't expect I'll ever have a better one.

Even so, I have hardly missed an Opening Day since. I did miss one, when I was just out of college and took a job too far from elk country. I plead temporary insanity. I was back in elk country the next fall.

So, for me, these memories are dry kindling. The calendar is the spark. Opening Day is the fire.

I recall another Opening Day, hunting solo on the Whitefish Divide. I crouched in a patch of alder brush with a cow call clenched in my teeth. I blew on it, hoping not to attract

LARRY JAVORSKY

the grizzly that had left its spoor all over the mountain.

To my surprise, an elk materialized from the timber to investigate my call.

One problem: The brush where I sat grew over my head. The only way I could shoot was standing up. It was long for an offhand shot, but not too long. I slowly stood up. I reached for a young fir tree to steady the forearm of my rifle. But when I grabbed the slender trunk, the tree top waved like a flag. The elk saw the motion and was gone before I could even begin to aim.

Another Opening Day, an ill wind blew over my favorite mountain in the Cabinet Range. Dawn arrived, as if the wind blew away the darkness. Treetops swayed in a violent breeze. I have never had much luck hunting elk in wind, so I figured I was in for a long, uneventful walk in the woods.

But the wind had sprinkled the forest floor with a golden carpet of freshly fallen larch needles. That corner of the Kootenai National Forest was so quiet that stalking in lug soles was like walking in your socks. I stalked the lee side of the Cabinets, moving through the forest silent as a lynx.

A bull was back there all right. I saw him through the trees, his neck almost blonde and his antlers the color of burnished pine. I don't know which of us was more surprised, the bull or myself. I know which of us acted quicker. The meat is gone, every tasty morsel of it, but the antlers still hang in my workshop, reminding me of the potential of Opening Days to come.

Years later I had an experience that taught me there might be more than one kind of Opening Day. The one on the calendar, and the one in the mind.

I spent a day on an archaeological expedition up the South Fork of the Flathead River. The dig was unusual in that the crew included members of the Blackfeet Tribe, Salish and Kootenai people, along with Euro-American archaeologists. These groups that had long viewed each other with suspicion worked shoulder to shoulder.

One of the sites they found was a massive pile of chert flakes in an otherwise nondescript piece of forest. The flakes marked a stopover place on a trail between the Flathead Valley and the Great Plains. This was the location where west-side Indians stopped to quarry rock for arrowheads before crossing the Continental Divide to hunt bison. The forest floor was thick with detritus from years of knapping big rocks into small, portable chunks.

As the head archaeologist described the find, my imagination flowed back hundreds, even thousands of years. Certainly, on every such hunt, there were young hunters. They were youngsters raised in the forested mountains on their first excursion to the bison fields of Great Plains. I imagined one such youngster sitting in that forest along the South Fork. I imagined him (or her) listening to ancient stories from the elders and watching the expert hands at work, sharpening bits of stone into arrowheads and fixing the arrowheads onto feathered shafts.

These people had no calendar except for the chill in the air and the passing flights of geese. They had no written laws, but instead ages of oral tradition. They had no junior high school except the eternal education of the land.

But I believe that camp marked a different kind of Opening Day. I think I understand a little of how it felt to be that youthful hunter, waiting. I can imagine the anticipation.

One of the members of the archaeological team was a traditionalist member of the Kootenai Tribe. He told me he didn't mind picking up the waste shards from the knapping fields, but didn't like to touch the arrowheads themselves.

"When our ancestors hunted, they were not just shooting an elk to throw it in the back of the pickup to brag at the bar," he told me. "They were hunting for survival. They said a prayer over every arrowhead. Those prayers are still in those arrowheads."

I cannot claim any part of that tradition. I have traditions of my own. But I can pledge this: I will not shoot an elk merely to throw it in my pickup and brag about it at the bar.

And, maybe when I'm afield this Opening Day, I will offer a prayer of my own. A prayer that there will always be elk wild and free in the mountains of Montana. And that there will always be Opening Days, for all of us to share. Together. ■

TIM CHRISTIE

Opening Day generates its own brand of excitement—often wrapped in memories of a first hunt, a bull that got away, or a special hunting camp.

DAY'S BOOKS

KID'S HUNTING DAY:

Sharing the Sunrise

by Leo Keane

Orion leaps over dark trees. His belt and scabbard and outflung constellations are a familiar banner in autumn's predawn sky. He is an old companion, Orion the Hunter in his everlasting pursuit of wild game.

Stars mirrored on the black river show us where the water is. I swing the boat into an eastward curve, a steady midstream course between flanks of looming cottonwoods. Shadows drift by. In this otherworldly darkness the clawing limbs of drowning logs seem like so many river ogres grasping for air—or for the unwary boatman. Thankful for even this little bit of starlight, and snugging up my life jacket a notch or two, I steer wide of these nightmares and forge downstream.

Our trusty Evinrude roars, or more exactly wheezes, for all it's worth. Which is good, since my payload this morning includes dozens of decoys, bags of camo, buckets of lunch and shells and calls and raincoats—the usual and substantial heap required of any well prepared duck hunter for a day afield and afloat. All this, plus me at the helm, and the old barge is about topped out. So with a 10-foot lead, and a firm hand on the throttle, I'm trailering a pup canoe, the cargo of which consists entirely of two duck hunters—father and son, Mike and Parker Biedscheid. Big Mike, at the stern, occasionally nudges a paddle blade against the swirling water to keep his canoe aligned. Parker seems to be dozing off.

That's understandable. If this twelve-year-old boy is like the rest of us on our first hunt, he was awake all night, if not the last several nights, anticipating this sunrise. For Parker, today is the moment of truth, the day when hunting dreams finally crystallize into the real world of water, sky, and whispering wings—and, at long last, a day to shoulder a gun in the out-of-doors. Invariably, however, Opening Day is first of all a huge relief, given the weeks of unbearable excitement revolving around its planning and preparation. Now the somnolent drone of the outboard, the warmth of hunting clothes, and this morning's fresh, frosty air is like an elixir for sleepiness.

I might nod off too, if I weren't busy with my own dreams: In my mind there is a picture of two boys, sixteen years old. It is a bright October morning on a lake thick with green cattails. The boys have push-poled their newly refurbished duck boat to the middle of the lake, through a labyrinth of weeds and channels they've learned by heart. The peninsula of cattails that is their blind and the opening where two dozen new decoys swim in the breeze were carefully selected weeks earlier, on one of many late summer forays to this

LEO KEANE

DAVE BOOKS

paradise of bluewing and mallard, wigeon and redhead, this wilderness of waist-deep water and head-high weeds. The boys could find their way to this blind on a moonless night. In fact, they did—with Orion as their guide. And now it is the final hours of a long awaited and exuberantly anticipated high-noon opener of the 1964 Minnesota waterfowl season, their first Opening Day.

That was my first Opening Day, exactly 35 hunting seasons ago, and had I been any more excited I would surely have floated away. Perhaps the only thing keeping me earthbound was the shared enthusiasm and nonstop banter of my fellow boatman. He was my new duck buddy and hunting confidant, the one friend who came to that moment the same way I did—via an unaccountable, yet irrepressible exhilaration at the sight of ducks on the wing.

LEO KEANE

Parker Biedscheid tunes his duck call in anticipation of the morning's action.

Then as now. As of this morning, Big Mike and I have been hunting ducks together for 35 seasons.

But enough reminiscing. This is Parker's day. Better yet, it's Kid's Hunting Day—one day set aside (typically the Saturday before the general waterfowl opener) specifically for hunters 15 years of age or younger. The young hunter must be accompanied by an adult (18 or older) who may not shoot or carry a gun. That's us. Mike and I are merely Parker's guides on this expedition. And by the rosy glow now silhouetting the Swan Range, we'd better be locating our blind.

Actually there is no big rush, as we seem to have all this water to ourselves. In fact, we have yet to see another boat—or boat light. Unbelievable. Next weekend, for the opening of Montana's general waterfowl season, this stretch of river will become a parade of watercraft; a virtual circus of rampant dogs, frantic hunters, screeching whistles, bellicose shouts—not much better than a race for a place to hunt. Which is precisely why Kid's Hunting Day is such an appealing concept. It affords the youngsters a quality hunting experience right when they are most impressionable—those first few days

When ducks float on cupped wings into a young hunter's life, a tradition passes to the next generation.

afield. And much as I appreciate this morning's solitude I can't help but wonder where tomorrow's waterfowl advocates will come from if they're not out here getting their feet wet today.

"Wake up!" Mike suggests to Parker as I cut the motor and we glide toward our blind. What a blessing this quietness after our prolonged journey, how soothing the soft sounds of nature at the first light of day. The river chortles, a goose beckons upstream, flocks of sandpipers scatter from our gravel bar, calling plaintively, fussing over the intrusion.

"Let's get to work boys." Mike has shifted into hunting mode. He hops from the canoe and splashes ashore. Parker jumps in with me. We'll toss out several dozen mallard dekes while Mike stages our goose blocks along the bar, closer to our blind. Being here plenty early, and particularly without the distraction of other hunters setting up nearby, affords us an uncommon luxury. We tweak and prod and coax this well-worn collection of decoys (some, our originals!) into a comfortable and convincing simulation of random family groups and pods of feeding birds. The oversized honkers are attention grabbers and confidence decoys and who knows, there is always the chance of bringing in one of the big boys today. Hope springs eternal.

Now the stars are quickly fading and early flocks are on the move; we've heard their whispering wings, found their indistinct shadows materializing overhead in the gathering light. I set Parker on shore with our small mountain of gear, which he'll portage to our blind (these kids do come in handy), and push the boat a short way upstream to a hiding place behind a sunken tree. When I rejoin father and son at the blind everything looks hunky-dory. Mike has sprucced the place up quite nicely, adding shards of bark and sprigs of willow to an existing aggregation of flotsam, driftwood, and root wads, while remodeling the "living space" to accommodate all three of us. As boys we built forts, today we build a blind. Same thing. And we still love it.

Then comes the reward for our labors and a moment to savor. In the twilight before sunup, while waiting for enough brightness to tell hens from drakes, mallard from wigeon or pintail, we finally stop moving. We retune our ears and eyes, relax our hearts and watch the world unfold, two men and a boy standing side by side by the river. If nothing else happens today, this moment alone is worth the trip. The sun exploding behind the Swans emblazons the sky with silvery clouds. Great-horns hoot, killdeer cry, bald eagles complain like rusty hinges. Two of them, prehistoric in size, watch us curiously from a towering snag. The island of spruce and cottonwood that is their domain forms a greenish-gray backdrop for our stage, a shoal in the river where 44 decoys perform even better than we planned—swimming purposefully, watching alertly, feeding contentedly. Could it get any better?

Heads up! We've got company! Shadows zigzag overhead on rustling wings, float down and plop into our spread like loaves of bread. That's our cue to suit up. Parker would have gladly been loaded and ready to shoot but we've held him back, waiting first of all for good lighting (usually somewhat past legal shooting time), but also to perhaps imprint on him the wonderment of a duck blind sunrise. That's expecting a lot of an excited youngster, and maybe putting the cart before the horse. On the other hand, it's our job to let the boy benefit from our experience, to share the wisdom of our age. Besides, why would we ruin a perfectly glorious daybreak with a fanfare of gunfire?

Parker is not convinced as Mike instructs him that he may now load one shell into his Remington Wingmaster. This, not only for safety but to ingrain in the young shooter the importance of timing, careful shot placement, and simply the desirability of taking it easy. I appreciate the lesson as well, given the cost of a box of shells these days. We disentangle our duck calls from spare hats and gloves and candy bars, and donning them we seem to be ready—for another flock, our first flight having quickly departed in a flurry of quacks and splashy wingbeats. Not that it matters. We only take shots on the wing, at decoying birds. No pot shots or pass shooting. After 35 years of hunting ducks, we know what we're here for.

Volumes have been written about why we hunt. I couldn't count the times I've been asked that question, and struggled for an answer. It is baffling for a non-hunter—how we can profess to love what we hunt, or, for that matter, hunt what we love. It's baffling enough for those of us who hunt. I'm still not sure which came first, and I've had plenty of slow days in duck blinds to think about it. When and where the seed was planted I can pinpoint on map and calendar, but how it grew is possibly as much a mystery as any act of creation. I do know that my love for the hunt found fertile ground where fields give way to water, in the wind-swept sloughs and big lakes and wide rivers where ducks frequent the skies. I know too that when that constellation of birds answers my call and turns on set wings to my blind and my decoys, it is no longer exactly me hiding there. For a breathless moment I'm suspended between man and nature. I'm part of the sky, part of the river. I'm in the eyes and wings of the birds. I am the hunter. In this modern day that is as close to creation as I'm likely to get.

But these are thoughts for after hours. We're out here to get close to some birds, and that's the only thing on Parker's mind. In fact, he spots our first workable flock, and sounds just like an old pro when he gives the duck hunter's familiar warning, "Incoming!" We drop like rocks and have our calls to our lips in one motion. Mike on his Duck Commander, me with my old Glynn Scobey, do what we've always done best, bring our decoys to life with a chorus of duck noise. When they're several hundred yards out and quartering toward us we greet the flight with a crescendo of "highballs." Together we sound like half a flock of ducks, and peering through the screen of our blind the desired effect is evident. It's a nice bunch, a dozen or so mallards, and they've zeroed in on our spread. Cruising on by, they shift into low gear. Now we lay it on thick with a persuasive "come back" call, slow, seductive. And they're ours. As one, the flock banks on set wings and begins their descent straight at us, 80 yards out. I keep them on line with soft feeding chuckles, while Mike coaches Parker. "Let 'em come...pick a greenhead... wait...wait...OK, *NOW!*"

LEO KINAN

Mike Biedscheid shows off one of Parker's first mallards—a bird that will never be forgotten.

At 25 yards, the birds are all but in our pocket as Parker stands for his shot. The mallards, so intent on finding their place at the river, don't even notice the boy. One shot rings out, and one greenhead falls from the startled flock. A drake that stays behind, floating in a circle of feathers, in the shoal of our river blind, his russet breast turned toward the blue morning of a boy's first duck hunt. A place, a moment, and a bird that will never be forgotten.

Parker's broad smile as he and Mike retrieve the drifting mallard assures me that we've succeeded, whether or not we see another duck. But that is not to be. There are flocks on the wing even before the boys have returned, and I'm kept busy tolling birds on my own.

Surprisingly, there is nothing more attractive to curious flocks than a hunter splashing around in the dekes. They love the commotion. And not infrequently, if you don't look up, they'll just about land on your head. We seem to have some of that going on right now as Mike and Parker try gingerly to make their way back to the blind under the white wings of swiftly passing flocks. This could be a banner day.

And it is. Flights of four, eight, or a dozen birds visit us at regular intervals. They are family groups mostly, this year's juveniles and adults in eclipse plumage, mallards that are fresh and eager to join our make-believe clan along the sparkling river shoal. Parker enjoys good action, and holds his own—one shot at a time—until the morning flight eventually tapers off. We retrieve all four of his birds amid the decoys, "red legs kicking."

Oh yes, there is a goose in this story—that most sought after yet ever-elusive quarry. A Canada honker who answers our call like a believer, who hastens to his rigid brothers on confident and unwavering wings, saluting them loudly.

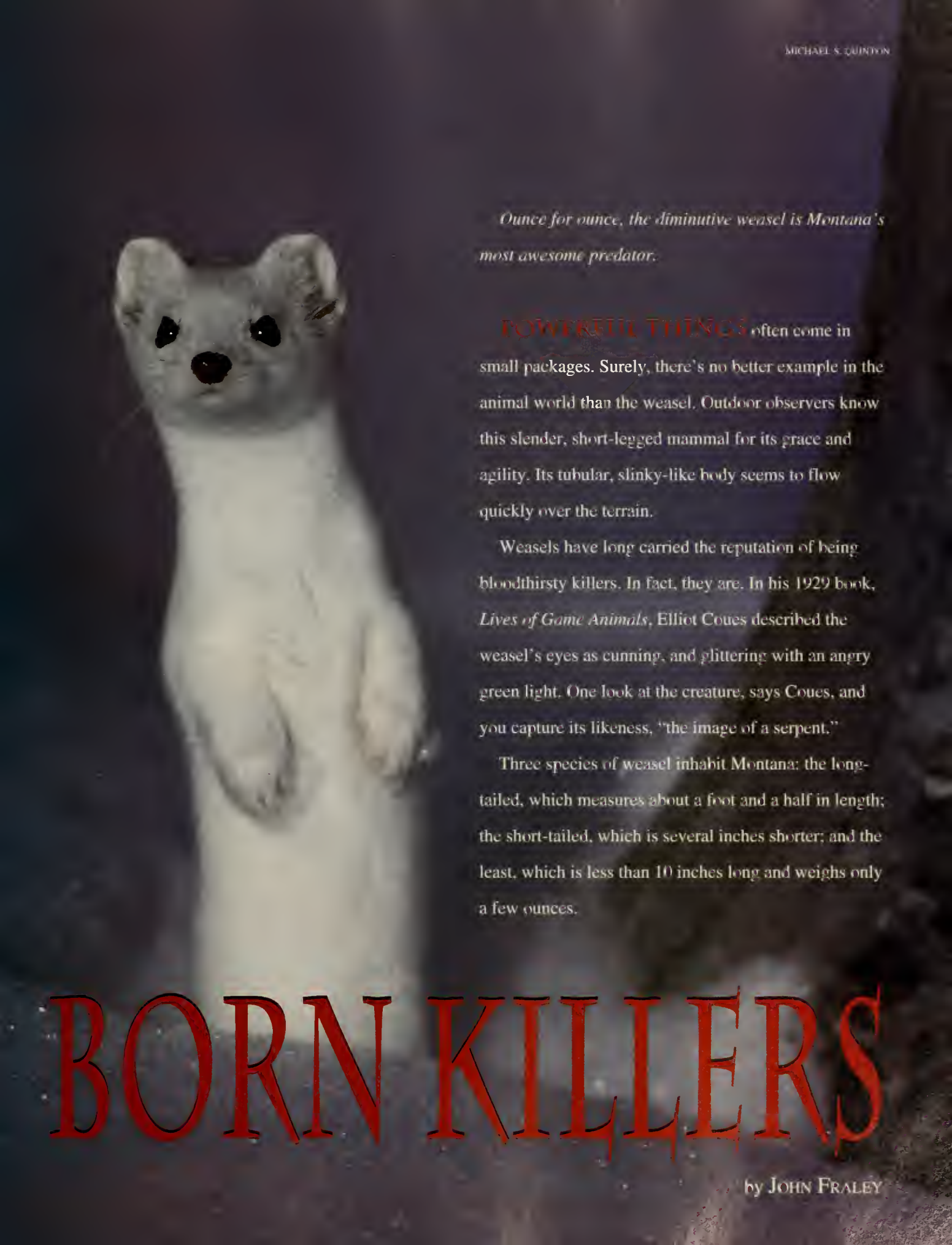
Until the shot is finally called. Then father and son rise together from the driftwood in our reenactment of an ancient choreography of hunter and game. In the twinkling of an eye, everything is changed. Like a curtain falling away, the brilliant river with dabbling ducks and watchful geese is suddenly a mere delusion, a stage with man. The bird, beautiful and animated in the morning sun, is transformed into the target—and at that moment, the center of a boy's universe. Once again a hunter becomes part of the sky, part of the river. And a young hunter rides the wings of a bird.

A good day hunting is a gift—the best of days, a miracle. That's what I'm thinking as the old Evinrude groans under its load of river-soaked, mud-caked cargo enroute to the boat landing. It is high noon. The river is placid and adrift with autumn leaves. The horrendous snags of morning darkness are mere bleached skeletons in the light of day. We are a little sunburned. In many ways, this is an Opening Day much like that milestone of 35 years ago.

On that long ago Opening Day, two boys gaze in disbelief as the most improbable flock of wigeon parachute out of the blue. Flying over a proliferation of decoys, hunters, and gunfire, the birds have selected the boys' set-up, their small pocket in the cattails, as the real thing, and float on cupped wings into their lives. Three of 20 birds stay behind, white breasts gleaming in the sun, and two boys are forever captured.

Parker's memory of today's Kid's Hunting Day is riding back to the landing with us, draped over a sack of decoys, iridescent heads and orange legs. A gift from nature.

Or perhaps that bird is miles away by now, on some friendly sandbar, gabbling with his brothers, that most improbable goose who kept on coming, who saw the hunter's eye and flared at exactly the right instant—a beautiful and memorable missed shot. That might be the one to make Parker a duck hunter for life. ■



MICHAEL S. QUINTON

BORN KILLERS

Ounce for ounce, the diminutive weasel is Montana's most awesome predator.

by JOHN FRALEY

POWERFUL THINGS often come in small packages. Surely, there's no better example in the animal world than the weasel. Outdoor observers know this slender, short-legged mammal for its grace and agility. Its tubular, slinky-like body seems to flow quickly over the terrain.

Weasels have long carried the reputation of being bloodthirsty killers. In fact, they are. In his 1929 book, *Lives of Game Animals*, Elliot Coues described the weasel's eyes as cunning, and glittering with an angry green light. One look at the creature, says Coues, and you capture its likeness, "the image of a serpent."

Three species of weasel inhabit Montana: the long-tailed, which measures about a foot and a half in length; the short-tailed, which is several inches shorter; and the least, which is less than 10 inches long and weighs only a few ounces.

In summer, all three sport brown fur above and whitish fur below. In winter, these weasels are a stunning pure white. But the long-tailed and short-tailed weasels have a black tip on their tail, while the least weasel does not. With the first two species, observers often see the black tip bounding through the winter woods before the white body materializes. No wonder the Bavarians named the weasel "Schonthierlein," pretty little creature.

While the long-tailed weasel is most common in Montana and throughout North America, the short-tailed weasel is found around the world and is the most widespread of all members of the weasel family. The long-tailed weasel is found in every North American habitat except the extremely dry deserts of western Arizona and Baja California.

Weasels are among the world's smallest, yet most formidable, carnivores. Ounce for ounce, they pack more meat-shredding power than perhaps any other animal on earth. At only a fraction of a pound, the weasel can take down and devour prey much larger than itself, including hares, ruffed grouse, chickens, and occasionally even young pigs. In the definitive classic, *American Weasels*, E.R. Hall wrote that the weasel is "unsurpassed...in the effectiveness with which it exercises its carnivorous heritage." Hall also noted that weasels have even attacked humans who have

AL DEMANGELAERE

JANET WASSINK

Above photos: *About eight inches in length and weighing only a few ounces, the least weasel (with bird) is the smallest carnivore in the world. The short-tailed weasel, or ermine, shown in winter pelage, is mostly nocturnal but also hunts during the day.*

Right: *The long-tailed weasel is found across the entire state.*

Opposite page: *Weasels can take down and consume animals much larger than themselves, like this snowshoe hare.*

TONI ULRICH

© ROBERT FRANZ

stood between them and their prey.

The mountain lion is often cited as the most awesome predator in North America, but the lion is a pantywaist compared to the weasel. For a mountain lion to equal the feat of a short-tailed weasel killing a snowshoe hare, it would have to down a prey animal weighing 3,000 pounds!

Weasels have a highly developed ambush-and-pursuit style of bringing down prey. They sprint to their victim, bite the animal at the base of the neck, and entwine the prey with their wiry body and legs. Weasels lap blood from the prey animal's open wounds and may eat part or all of the body. They focus mostly on voles, mice, and shrews, but when these easy targets are scarce they switch to larger ones.

The weasel's sharp, shear-like teeth have been called the most highly adapted of any carnivore. Oversized muscle masses attached across the sides of the skull operate the animal's jaws. Imagine a pocket-size, lightning-quick *Tyrannosaurus rex* and you've got the picture.

Bruce Gillingham, who studied the predatory behavior of short-tailed weasels in a University of Montana research project, found that weasels are indeed "born killers." In his study a young weasel separated from its mother at birth was eventually just as effective in seizing and killing mice as siblings that remained with the mother.

He also found that weasels quickly develop their killing technique, which consists of a seizing bite followed by a surgically accurate killing bite. Shortly after birth, young weasels' play mimicked this technique, and by three months of age all the weasels in his study killed as often and as efficiently as adults. "Ermines kill both by severing the atlas-axis complex (spinal column) and by piercing the base of the skull," Gillingham noted. He said he often heard an "audible crunch," presumably the sound of the skull being crushed, when a weasel applied a killing bite.

Rancher Larry Phillipe of Kalispell saw first-hand the killing power of the weasel when one or more of the diminutive creatures repeatedly invaded his chicken coop and killed about a dozen of his grandkids' prized chickens. "He got the roosters first," Phillipe says. "I couldn't believe it. These were big, fighting roosters."

After the weasel killed the roosters, which occupied the lower roosts in the chicken house, Phillipe thought the hens in the upper roosts were safe. Wrong. Before long, the weasel killed the hens too. Then the weasel pulled down a few farm ducks for good measure. Phillipe tried to secure entry holes with plywood, but was unable to exclude the weasel from the pen. Phillipe believes that more than one weasel may have been involved because he had seen "a whole family of them" crossing the road near his house.

"I was hoping that was the end of my chicken ranching."

TOM J. ULRICH

Born in April or May, these young long-tailed weasels will grow to adult size in about eight weeks.

Phillipe says, "but now the grandkids want to raise chickens and ducks again this year. I told them the birds won't make it but they insist, so I guess I'll take another shot at sealing the holes in the coop."

Weasels killing chickens is nothing new. In 1925 a Canadian rancher reported the following: "A weasel last night made its way into our fowl house, the door being inadvertently left open. The weasel killed eleven fowl, some of which were dragged into the yard. All the largest fowl were selected, the pullets remaining untouched though they were in the majority. Next night the weasel dug a hole beneath the building and killed a hen and two cocks, returning for another during the day, making a total of fourteen in all."

The rancher's sister wrote in March of 1925 that a "cheeky" weasel learned to take pieces of meat out of her hand. She considered it well behaved until one day the weasel "got hold of my skirt twice and tried to pull me down its hole." She wrote that the poultry were frightened at first by the weasel but eventually got used to its presence. Many ranchers, including this woman, recognize that on balance the weasel is the farmer's friend. They allow weasels on their farms because they kill many more rodents than chickens.

FWP wildlife biologist Tim Thier says that weasels are perhaps the boldest carnivores in their behavior towards humans. When Thier was staying in a cabin while working on a bear study in northwestern Montana, a short-tailed weasel scooted into the building as Thier opened the door. After Thier shared some hamburger with the weasel, it adopted him.

"It came back every day for a week and met me at the door," Thier said. "The weasel got so friendly that it started climbing up in my lap. I brushed it off my lap and it climbed up inside my pants." At that point, Thier felt that the weasel was getting carried away, so he swatted the animal. The weasel darted out of the cabin and never returned. "I was really attached to him at that point, so I was disappointed," remembers Thier. "But who wants an animal with teeth like that climbing up his pant leg?"

Thier also found weasels staking out his baited bear cubbies. "They would sit on the bait and just stare at you when you approached," he said. "They seemed to dare you to try and chase them off."

Thier says that typical weasel densities in Montana habitats are in the range of 10 animals per square mile, making them by far the most abundant carnivores in Montana. He also notes that the least weasel, which primarily inhabits north-central and northeastern Montana, is beginning to show up in northwestern Montana.

The weasel's abundance and relative boldness make it a desirable animal for young trappers. For centuries in North America, weasel trapping and weasel pelts have been important. The Koyokon people in Alaska value the weasel because of its place in the rites of passage from youth to adulthood. After early snows each winter, youngsters trap weasels in the woods near villages. A boy's first short-tailed weasel is often stuffed, decorated, and hung from the ceiling of the house—a source of pride. The rare capture of a least weasel, "Kusga" in Koyokon terminology, holds a special power and is thought to portend a lucky life.

Modern trappers catch weasels in marten sets, or seek them specifically with weasel boxes. Weasel pelts bring $3 to $8 depending on the fur market, and offer youngsters a way to directly appreciate nature and develop a primitive skill. In addition, the thin-skinned weasel is quite easy to tan in a simple salt-alum solution.

The winter weasel's snow-white pelt (ermine) has long been sought for garments and decoration. Shoshone and other tribal members across North America considered the pelt a source of power and beauty, often placing dozens or more on a single garment. And as Raymond Hall writes quaintly, the ermine's fur is "known to all and justly esteemed, especially for its luster in artificial light, where it is scarcely excelled in enhancing the beauty of gems and their feminine wearers." The pelts remain popular for decoration on hand-made garments.

A number of animals prey on weasels, including larger members of the weasel family such as marten. Snowy owls and other raptors also take weasels, although sometimes not without a fight. In 1929 a Canadian reported observing a bald eagle that had the bleached skull of an ermine clinging to its throat.

Some scientists believe that the ermine's black tail tip in winter evolved as a decoy to mislead raptors about the location of its body. When you watch an ermine sprinting over the snow, this conclusion is inescapable. As the Koyokon riddle goes: "Wait, I see something; it looks like a bit of charred wood waving around in the air. [Answer] The short-tailed weasel's tail in winter."

In Montana, weasels breed in July or August, when the female comes into estrus and the testicles of the male expand to about 13 times normal size. Females first breed at three to four months of age, but males don't reach sexual maturity until one year. A female in heat allows the male to approach, but does not allow mating until after a vigorous fight. A single copulation lasts three hours or more and takes place repeatedly over the several days the female is receptive.

The fertilized embryos in the "delayed implantation" process remain dormant in the female's uterus for an average of 280 days, then implant about 25 days prior to birth. The young are born in April and May. Like other carnivores, young weasels are blind and incapable of looking after themselves at birth. They grow to adult size by the end of their second month. Weasels raise one litter, numbering four to nine young, per year.

TOM J. ULRICH

At six or seven weeks, young weasels begin to follow their mother as she hunts for the family.

The high surface-to-volume ratio of the weasel's body requires the animal to move almost constantly and to eat often. Because of their tubular shape, weasels can't roll into a ball like many mammals to cut down on heat loss. Also, their coat does not offer great insulation, and they carry little fat. Their metabolic rate ranks near the top of the mammal scale.

Although most weasels only move a few hundred yards in a single night, studies show that they travel 7- to 15-day circuits, following the same general path during each circuit. Unlike some members of their tribe, weasels are almost as active during the

MICHAEL S. QUINTON

Small rodents—shrews, voles, and deer mice (shown here)—form the bulk of the weasel's diet, but they also eat rabbits, ground squirrels, birds, snakes, frogs, insects, and even worms.

Montana Weasels: Vital Statistics

	Length	Weight	Identification	Distribution
Least weasel *Mustela nivalis*	10 in.	1-3 oz.	no black tip on tail	mostly northeastern part of state
Short-tailed weasel *Mustela erminea*	7-13 in.	1-6 oz.	tail 2-4 in.	western & southern part of state
Long-tailed weasel *Mustela frenata*	11-17 in.	3-12 oz.	tail 3-6 in.	entire state

day as they are at night.

Weasels are effective in hunting, particularly for voles and mice, under winter snows. This "tunnel hunting" also conserves body heat.

Weasels lead a solitary existence except for the breeding season. Males defend territories of about 20 acres from other males, but do not exclude females from their territories. Home ranges are larger when small mammal prey is scarce.

As Richard Nelson wrote in his treatise on the Koyokons, *Make Prayers to the Raven*, weasels and other forest carnivores fascinate humans with their power: "They share with humanity the gift of cunning. They are quick and agile, inquisitive of mind, always restless. They move at the open edge and the precipice, rush suddenly upon errant prey, then vanish like shadows, leaving flecks of blood to soak into the snow."

Although they are the smallest of forest carnivores, weasels may embody the highest development of carnivore efficiency and power. Anyone who has looked into the smoldering, ink-black eyes of the weasel will agree. ■

I spent my first year of Hungarian partridge hunting combing grassy swales and brushy coulees—the same places I'd found quail in the Midwest. That was my first mistake. I was running a springer spaniel at the time, a dog raised on ducks and the odd pheasant. That was my second. On the very rare occasions when I actually flushed a covey, I would watch, transfixed, while they flew out of sight, then forget about them. Mistake number three. By the time I'd finished my first season, I'd accumulated enough mistakes to write a magazine article.

Huns Are Where You Find Them

by Dave Carty

JOE ELLIOTT

So here I am.

Actually, if the last 13 years of hunting Huns has taught me anything, it's that the birds are as unpredictable as any gamebird on earth. Expect one thing, and they'll do another. Forecast a good season, and the population will crash. And woe to those who would make categorical statements about behavior; they'll be liars before the day is done.

I was lucky. Prior to my second season, I bought a dog from the modestly famous Ben O. Williams, in those days perhaps the preeminent Hun hunter in the state. Ben led me down the path of righteousness, and subsequently, having acquired a rudimentary understanding of technique, I was able to grow and learn on my own. It's been a lovely experience—not always productive, mind you, but invariably entertaining.

It's as easy to predict Hun behavior as it is to predict the weather, and considerably less accurate. So perhaps I'll come at this through the back door and defang a few myths I've heard over and over again.

Myth 1: The birds won't hold for a point.

Nonsense. In fact, Hungarian partridge hold far better than many other gamebirds, including ruffed grouse, pheasants, and sharptails. But that doesn't mean they won't run from under a point if, for whatever reason, they feel like it.

On the other hand, some coveys hold one day and not the next, and if such behavior is related in any way to the weather, stars, wind, or the Dow Jones, I've yet to see the correlation. Which segues, sloppily, into the next myth:

Huns can't be approached late in the season.

I've had good late-season hunting on partridge for so many years, and in so many types of weather, that I can only conclude that whoever is responsible for this myth has spent too much time reading outdoor magazines. A case in point: On the last weekend of the season several years ago, I parked at a favorite spot and stepped out into six inches of new snow. Almost immediately, my little Brittany, Fancy, slammed into a point. When the covey got up, they spread out along a shallow,

DAVE BOOKS

If the last 13 years of hunting Huns has taught me anything, it's that the birds are as unpredictable as any gamebird on earth. Expect one thing, and they'll do another.

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snow-covered creek bottom, and I spent the next half hour literally kicking the birds up from under my dog's nose. It was my last hunt of the season, and it couldn't have been better. I've had dozens of similar experiences.

So, I'll argue with anyone who claims the birds can't be approached and won't hold late in the year. That said, I will admit that I find fewer coveys in December than I find during the peak months of October and November. Again, I wish someone could tell me why. Have the birds been decimated by hunters and coyotes? Highly unlikely, although coveys at this time of year are often smaller. Have they moved elsewhere, perhaps to some kind of winter range with slightly denser cover, as sage grouse are known to do? Possibly, although that's something I have yet to confirm. The point is, when I do find birds late in the season, most of them hold and some don't—same as the rest of the year.

Myth Three: Wind makes the birds skittish.

Nope.

So let's talk about technique.

Although I'm a genetically lousy shot, before you can shoot 'em, you have to find 'em, and that I can do. If there's grain around—wheat or barley—they'll usually be found somewhere near it early in the morning and late in the afternoon.

I've had my best luck hunting late in the day, but I've also spent far more time hunting late than early. Generally, I hunt early only when it's too hot to do anything else, and then only the first two or three hours of the day are really good—starting just after dawn until, say, 9:00 a.m. Last fall, a friend from Arizona was up for a couple days in mid-September, and during our first morning we moved a covey in blistering heat—it was already pushing 80 degrees by 8:00 a.m. To make matters worse, the birds flushed from an open hillside, as they often do, but settled into a rank, chest-high field of sweet clover.

I haven't hunted in such sweltering, miserable conditions since my days as a kid booting early-season quail out of Iowa cornfields. My buddy's three dogs—a pair of shorthairs and a sweet little pointer bitch, were well conditioned to the heat of Arizona. But my Brit and setter had spent the previous summer watching television, and were in no shape that early in the season to find birds in that jungle of undergrowth. Instead, they halfheartedly followed his dogs around and backed the birds they pointed.

Aside from the heat, that hunt was a notable exception for another reason: I've found Huns are almost never in thick cover, and rarely fly into it, even after the initial flush. Instead, I typically find them on grassy hillsides with a scattering of sagebrush, never far from grain.

Ben Williams, on the other hand, used to specialize in wild coveys—birds that live in open grassland, sometimes miles from cropland. I hunt a few wild coveys every year, and an examination of their crops reveals that they eat a plethora of weed seeds as well as an occasional hopper or other bug. They seem to do just fine, but if my experience is any indication, wild

If ever a bird was meant to be hunted by pointers, the Hungarian partridge is that bird.

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coveys are fewer and farther between than the already few and far between cropland birds.

My typical October hunt starts at around mid-afternoon. My dogs and I will comb the edges of wheatfields, and if I don't find birds there I'll move farther out into the surrounding grasslands. Over the years, I've learned to expect certain coveys in certain areas, but they're rarely consistent about it. If I can find the covey once out of three tries, I figure I'm doing pretty good.

For the record, it's far more difficult to find Huns without good dogs. If ever a bird was meant to be hunted by pointers, the Hungarian partridge is that bird. Sure, you can find them with Labs, goldens, springers, or French poodles, but for optimum results you need an animal that is built to cover real estate. The retrieving and flushing breeds aren't bred for that type of work, no matter how well suited they may be for other types of hunting. And yes, I have hunted over springers and Labs. Please send all irate letters regarding my parentage to Timbuktu.

All right. Your pointer has now found birds. He's 150 yards out with his tail in the air, waiting for you. Arrive at his side forthwith—the birds won't hold forever. Then, and this is very important, keep walking *past* your dog. Newcomers stop behind their dogs and wait for the birds to go up. And they will—50 yards out. I've found coveys holding over 100 yards from my dog, although that's not typical, either. Generally speaking, they'll be 15 to 20 yards away, but by the time they flush and you shoot, they'll be 35 yards distant, pushing the range of an improved cylinder barrel. Any way you can close that gap before they go up will be a big help—especially if you shoot like me.

Watch where they go. If you lose sight of them over a hill, which is what often happens, follow their line of flight and your chance of reflushing them will be about 50/50. Coveys flushed a second time are usually easier to find, for the birds often won't fly quite as far.

Unfortunately, some birds seem to vanish. Where do they go? After years of trying to figure that out, my best guess is that some coveys alight and then shortly afterwards take off again. I've actually seen them do this once or twice, but that's hardly enough of a sample to prove my point. Nevertheless, when I mark a covey after a flush, I operate on the assumption that they won't stick around forever, and as soon as I've collected any birds I may have shot, I whistle in the dogs and follow them up. I don't believe in allowing the covey 15 minutes or so to "put down scent"—by the time you've walked the 200 to 400 yards they typically travel, they will have had more than enough time to smell up the place.

Huns generally stay in tight groups, even after they've been flushed a couple of times. When they do scatter, however, you can be in for a real treat. Single Huns usually hold tight—as tight as any bobwhite quail. Once, after we scattered a covey up and down the sides of a dry creek bed, my setter pointed into a tangle of brush; since I couldn't believe a Hun would fly into that stuff, I stomped on it once or twice, expecting a jackrabbit. Nothing happened. Only when I turned my back did the bird flush. Slack-jawed, I watched it go.

Typical behavior? After 13 seasons with Huns, all I can say is, you're asking me? ■

Harris Conservation Easement: Mule Deer Mecca

DONALD M. JONES

DAVE BOOKS

by Jim Williams and Bruce Auchly

Snap-and-flutter sounds of dancing sharp-tailed grouse penetrate the early morning air. The avian ballroom is an elevated grassy bench near the foothills of the Highwood Mountains in central Montana. Male birds, like generations before them, gather here every spring and perform their ritualistic displays to attract hens for breeding. A momentary disruption occurs as a mule deer doe and her twin fawns stroll through the dancing ground on their way to a large patch of hawthorn shrubs.

Far below, near an old corral, the sounds of cattle and ranch hands echo down Highwood Creek. It is the start of another day on the Harris Land and Cattle Company Ranch. Similar to many other Montana ranches that provide productive wildlife habitat, the Harris L&C Ranch differs in one significant aspect: A conservation easement approved by the Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission a year and a half ago ensures this 10,000-acre property will always remain a cattle ranch and never be subdivided into urban ranchettes or neighborhoods.

"It will preserve our ranch as a working ranch," says Doran Lynch, whose family owns the property. "It is highly productive agricultural land and it will benefit wildlife."

RICHARD MOESEL

Above: *Pheasants find food and protection along Highwood Creek and in nearby brushy coulees.*

Right: *The ranch's rich combination of shrub and grassland provides winter habitat for more than 500 mule deer.*

Opposite page: *Located at the north end of the Highwood Mountains, the Harris Land and Cattle Company was formed in 1949. The conservation easement will maintain the agricultural productivity of the ranch while protecting wildlife habitat and ensuring public access.*

RODNEY SCHLECHT

With the easement, Harris Land and Cattle Company has come full circle from John Harris, who homesteaded the area and lived off the land more than 100 years ago, to great-grandson Doran, whose move will save the ranch's wildlife habitat from numerous threats.

John Harris came to Montana from Missouri in the mid-1860s as a teenager. Fur trapping, hunting, and land were probably the lure, but he soon started working for William Conrad and I.G. Baker and the Conrad Circle Cattle Company. Harris became the general manager of the operation, which ran about 16,000 head of cattle from the Highwoods to Calgary, Alberta, 300 miles north. The Conrad Circle Cattle Company lasted 40 years. During that time, Harris bought up the land around his homestead on Highwood Creek and put together the main ranch as it exists today. Around 1910, one of John's sons, Howell, took over the operation. Howell eventually bought out his six brothers and sisters in 1949 and incorporated the ranch into the Harris Land and Cattle Company. Howell died in 1972, and the ranch passed to his daughter, Marjorie Gray. In 1982, her son, Doran Lynch, took over.

With a long tradition as a responsible land steward, the ranch was perfect for FWP's Habitat Montana program. In 1987, the Legislature authorized the setting aside of approximately $2.8 million annually in hunting license dollars for habitat conservation. FWP can obtain land in several ways, including outright purchase and conservation easements. Land values and social resistance generally prohibit FWP from owning land. Recognizing those barriers, the 1987 Legislature directed FWP to use conservation easements whenever possible.

A conservation easement allows a buyer to purchase certain rights from a landowner. In the case of the Harris Land and Cattle Company Ranch, FWP paid $1.5 million. For that sum, the ranch agreed not to subdivide into less than 640-acre parcels, and then only for agricultural purposes. Also prohibited are sodbusting, cultivation of native rangeland, outfitting or fee hunting, surface mining, commercial feedlots, game farms, dumps, and removal, control, or manipulation of any shrubs browsed by wildlife.

In return, the ranch owners may continue to live on the ranch, but they may build no more than three new residences. They may also continue the ranch's cattle operation as well as cultivate and farm existing haylands; continue to regulate public use of the property; develop and maintain water resources; and repair or improve existing buildings, corrals, and roads.

BRUCE AUCHLY

"It helped us financially," Lynch says.

Entering into a conservation easement, however, met with some local resistance. Ken Engellant, Chouteau County commissioner, says he has no quarrel with the family. "I know Doran and Marge quite well." Engellant says it's more a philosophical disagreement. "We feel it's a little presumptuous to say something is forever. Their grandchildren could be cussing them out. We're pretty long term in this county, third and fourth generations."

Lynch, who traces his Montana roots back five generations to his great, great grandmother, says he feels the ranch has upheld its ties to the community. "My kids may not want the ranch," he explains. "Heck, we may not even own the ranch in 10 years."

There are other methods to help ranch owners pay bills. A recent, popular method is outfitting. Lynch tried outfitters for awhile, and had a good experience with a bird-hunting outfitter, but there were no guarantees. "The outfitting was not a sure thing," he says. "And we needed help financially. This was a way to do it and feel good about it."

The Highwood Mountains

are volcanic in origin. These volcanic soils harbor a rich variety of native bunchgrasses, forbs, and shrubs. The ranch lies at the northern end of the Highwood range. Highwood Creek, cradled by a vigorous cottonwood grove, flows through approximately eight miles of the property. The combination of riparian and upland grass-shrub communities lends this property to mule deer and sharp-tailed grouse habitat. Unlike many of FWP's other conservation easements acquired primarily for elk habitat, this easement primarily protects mule deer and sharp-tailed grouse habitat.

We're at the end of the mountain range," Lynch says, "where it turns into the plains. We have a real large mule deer population. I figure 400 to 500 permanent and more in the winter."

Grassland, shrubland, and a riparian forest compose the ranch's wildlife habitat. Overall, the 10,000-acre property is made up of approximately 65 percent native grasslands and 35 percent native shrublands—a classic recipe for wildlife habitat in central Montana. The most common native grasses include Idaho fescue, rough fescue, bluebunch wheatgrass, and timber oatgrass. Common forbs in the grassland complex are lupine, prairie smoke, alumroot, anemone, fringed sage, and pussytoes. These grasslands provide valuable spring, summer, and fall habitat for sharp-tailed grouse and a host of native grassland songbirds, both resident and migratory.

The rich and abundant stands of shrubs include hawthorn, woods rose, snowberry, chokecherry, serviceberry, and other species that flourish in relatively moist and productive habitats. Healthy stands of black cottonwood and aspen dominate the deciduous trees along Highwood Creek. Willow, dogwood, and other riparian shrubs are also present. The combination of shrub and grasslands meets all of the year-round habitat needs of mule deer.

Both resident and migratory mule deer occupy the property at various times throughout the year. During severe winters, the sun-bathed, wind-swept slopes of Harris Mountain draw mule deer not only from the immediate area but also from Forest Service lands in the Highwood Mountains to the south.

One of the terms of the conservation easement that any future landowner would have to comply with is a rest-rotation grazing system on the native rangelands. Rest-rotation grazing allows a pasture to have two growing seasons of rest in every three-year cycle or rotation.

This system, set up jointly by the landowner and FWP, maintains and enhances the native forage, both grass and shrubs, for wildlife and cattle. Development of the system was easy—the ranch already had a rest-rotation type cattle grazing system in place. It was simply a matter of capturing the design in the conservation easement. The numbers and variety of wildlife present on the ranch reflect the success of the existing grazing system.

A more immediate and formidable threat was the specter of subdivision. The ranch had been successful in staving off development, but until the easement there was no guarantee how long Lynch could keep refusing developers and urban escapees. "I've personally had five or six people ask me if we would sell off some of the creek bottom," he says.

Rural subdivisions around Great Falls are increasing. Tough cattle markets have forced the sale of many long-time family cattle ranches in central Montana. More and more commuters appear willing to live in the mountain foothills or creek bottoms and make the daily 45-minute drive to town.

Large-scale landscape changes can have a profound negative impact on wildlife populations in central Montana through the loss of critical winter and year-round ranges for deer, elk, and other native wildlife species. Cooperative efforts between landowners and FWP can protect these critical habitats as working agricultural operations for future generations of both Montana ranchers and sportsmen to enjoy.

The easement also solved two other related problems for the ranch and sportsmen: weeds and hunting access. Weed seeds can be transported in mud-caked vehicle undercarriages and spread to formerly weed-free areas. The easement guarantees access for hunters, but it's park and walk. "It protects the ranch from a whole host of vehicles that have been god knows where," Lynch says.

As an example, Lynch points to the eight miles of Highwood Creek that flow through the ranch. "The whole creek bottom has weeds," he says. "We've been spraying knapweed for 11 years. We probably should have been spraying for 20."

Weed control, hunting access, wildlife habitat, working ranches remaining for future generations. Early on a summer morning, the knotty questions dissolve into snapshots of mule deer feeding in coulees, prairie grouse dancing, songbirds defending their piece of the prairie, and ranch hands gathering for another day of work. Conservation easements can keep these pictures a reality for generations to come. ■

Harris Conservation Easement

Location: 30 miles east of Great Falls on the north slope of the Highwood Mountains.
Size: 10,000 acres.
Acquisition date: 1998.
Management goal: To maintain the existing agricultural operation while providing habitat for mule deer, sharp-tailed grouse, and a variety of other game and nongame species.
Hunting opportunities: Contact FWP's regional headquarters in Great Falls for information: FWP Region 4, P.O. Box 6610, Great Falls, MT 59406; phone 406-454-5840.

Furry Collections of Quirks

by Mark Henckel

One of these years, I'm going to own a Real Hunting Dog.

You know what I mean—the kind of hunting dog you read about in those big-time outdoor magazines, see at those fancy field trials, watch on those hunting videos.

Perhaps it will be a pointer or setter who can scent birds on a desert-dry day, in a howling gale, at the distance of a mile, then home in straight and lock up tight.

Or maybe it'll be a retriever who can swim down wing-tipped ducks and geese, break ice and push slush, and bring the birds to hand with nary a toothmark.

Or maybe it'll be a perfect flushing dog who works close, flushes well, makes every retrieve, and pours my morning coffee for me, too.

Maybe.

But more than likely, if you bump into me in the field this fall, you'll find me with yet another furry collection of quirks—the same kind of hunting dog I've always had.

I'll be putting up with their idiosyncrasies. They'll be tolerating mine.

This wish for a Real Hunting Dog comes to mind these days because I'll be starting out a new dog again this fall. It happens to me every dozen years or so. An old hunting dog dies or simply gets too old. You shed a few tears. You wonder if you could ever replace the void left in your heart. Then a new puppy comes into your life.

The hunter and hunting dog cycle starts all over again.

Each new puppy brings with it hopes and dreams—The Perfect Dog—The Dog of a Lifetime—A Real Hunting Dog.

But when I look back at the various hunting dogs I've called my own, perfection isn't exactly what comes to mind.

Family pets in addition to being weekend hunters, they all had some things they did well. Other things they did sort of okay. But the things I seem to remember best are all the quirks and oddities, the less-than-perfect baggage that they also brought with them into the field.

Growing up, my first hunting dog was a black Lab/cocker spaniel mix that my dad rescued from someone in the parking lot of the local pound.

Each new puppy brings with it hopes and dreams—The Perfect Dog—The Dog of a Lifetime—A Real Hunting Dog.

That dog had a dead-near-perfect nose for grouse. He grew extremely smart about birds, what they'd do and where they'd go. And as a flushing dog, he worked close and worked well.

But he hated feathers in his mouth and steadfastly refused to retrieve. He'd find the bird after you knocked it down, and might even put a paw on it to hold it for you. But you'd better hustle over there and pick it up yourself, because there was no way his mouth was going to be bothered.

And whatever you do, don't even think about shooting a duck over that dog or even hunt too close to deep water. Despite being half-Lab, he profoundly hated to swim. If he couldn't wade a creek, he'd never hunt the other side.

After college and with a new bride to impress, I got the first dog of my adult life—a beautiful Irish setter—the better to make me a gentleman upland bird gunner. A big, rangy dog, he cruised the miles across the sagebrush prairie. He crashed through brush for pheasants. He was a steady retriever of birds big and small, and did well on ducks, too, even on the iciest days.

But that big setter just flat wouldn't point, as pointers and setters are supposed to. Somewhere along the way in his bloodline, it must have been bred out of him. He was a flushing setter. And no amount of reading up on the subject by me, or work with him, could change him.

He also had a deep fondness for chasing rabbits—especially those big eastern Montana jackrabbits. It was a habit that I just couldn't break in him. One of those jacks would jump up and it would be tally-ho and off to the races until both dog and rabbit disappeared over some distant hill. In fact, among the many retrieves he made for me were two rabbits—a cottontail and a jack—both of which he ran down himself, then delivered to his master.

And after a sage grouse almost pecked his eye out, he did develop a hard mouth. He wouldn't chew the birds, but he'd put one crunch on them with those big jaws of his so the birds wouldn't fight him anymore.

When the old setter died, he was replaced by a springer spaniel pup. A more trusting and faithful companion was never born. When he tangled with a porcupine, he let me reach far into his mouth to pull out the quills and never even whimpered. He was a fearless diver into deep cover, literally raking himself raw on thorns in pursuit of tight-holding pheasants and grouse.

The springer worked close. He listened well. He braved the heaviest flows in Montana rivers to retrieve sticks and logs and whatever else you threw for him.

But he never got the hang of retrieving birds very well. Huns were

"School Daze" by Jim Killen, courtesy of the artist and Wild Wings Inc. Lake City, MN 55041. 1-800-445-4833

okay. Sharptails were hit and miss. Sage grouse and pheasants were definitely out. And I wouldn't even think about shooting a duck or goose over him. He'd nudge the birds I knocked down and roll them over, as if looking for a handle to carry them with, but he just wouldn't bring them back.

His darkest moment came when I shot a rooster pheasant that landed stone dead, smack in the middle of a deep, wide creek. The springer leaped into the water and swam for it—then pushed and nudged the bird to the far bank. For 10 minutes or more, I used every command I could think of—then created some new ones—to try to get him to bring that bird back across to me. All he did was nudge it, mouth it, and roll it, over and over and over.

In the end, I called him back across, then put him at heel for a half-mile as I walked to a distant bridge, then hiked along the other side of the creek.

When I finally reached the bird and picked it up, there wasn't a toothmark on it. But other than the head, wings, and legs, there wasn't a feather left on it either! The springer had mouthed it so much that he had totally plucked the body of that pheasant. But he wouldn't pick it up.

Aside from that, he was a great hunting companion and a cheerful partner in camp. He'd share your venison stew at dinnertime, eating everything except the peas. They'd be licked clean and stacked in a little pile in the corner of his bowl.

But by the time last fall arrived, the old springer was almost 14 years old. He was just about stone-deaf. He had lost the zip in his step and his hard-charging ways. He would only walk behind me, stepping on my heels as I strode along, bumping into the back of my legs when I stopped.

It was time again for a change.

The springer would live out his days in the lap of luxury, fed and petted and pampered, without the worry of what to do with a pheasant on the far bank of a creek.

A small and shiny black Lab pup would enter my life.

Too young to take part in the current season, he'd have a year of growth under his belt before we'd take to the field together this fall.

What adventures might we share?

What memories might we make?

What furry collection of quirks might he be, the better for me to remember him by?

Or could he be, would he be, might he be that Real Hunting Dog, The Perfect Dog, The Dog of a Lifetime that every hunter dreams of calling his own?

Only time will tell—good times spent together—as the hunter and hunting dog cycle begins anew. ■

NEW BLACKFOOT-CLEARWATER POSTER AVAILABLE

To help protect a critical wildlife migration corridor connected to the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area, the Missoula-based Five Valleys Land Trust (FVLT) and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) commissioned nationally renowned artist Monte Dolack to create an original painting and poster capturing the essence of the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area. The WMA provides a winter respite for thousands of elk and deer that migrate through the corridor each year to find shelter from the long, snowy winters in the wilderness.

The poster, unveiled at the 50th anniversary celebration of the Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA in June, helped mark the beginning of a two-year effort to permanently protect 7,800 acres of this important winter range through a series of land purchases and exchanges. The project involves a private-public partnership that hopes to raise $2.2 million. Proceeds from sale of the poster will contribute to the project's success.

The Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA, Montana's largest state-managed wildlife management area, offers sanctuary to numerous wildlife species and provides recreationists opportunities to hunt, camp, hike, fish, and view wildlife. Currently, FWP leases 7,800 acres in the heart of the management area from Plum Creek Timber Company. Although this arrangement has been of benefit historically, and Plum Creek has no immediate plans to sell its holdings within the WMA, rising development pressures in western Montana make it increasingly hard for private landowners to make long-term commitments. "The permanent preservation of this land will ensure the long-time viability of this critical habitat," says Wendy Ninteman, executive director of Five Valleys Land Trust. "We would rather take action now than be forced to react later—when it might be too late."

Proceeds from the sale of this new Monte Dolack poster will help purchase a 7,800-acre inholding in the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area.

For more information on the poster, contact Five Valleys Land Trust at at 104 E. Main, Missoula, MT 59801 (406-542-1652) or visit the FVLT Web site at www.fvlt.org. Unsigned posters are available at $30 apiece; 200 signed and five remarqued posters are $100 and $350, respectively. The original acrylic painting is also for sale.

Five Valleys Land Trust is a nonprofit organization engaging in conservation stewardship and educational activities to encourage sound conservation practices in Missoula County and the adjoining counties in Montana.

MEYER NAMED COMMISSIONER OF THE YEAR

FWP Commission Chairman Stan Meyer of Great Falls has been selected by the Western Wildlife Law Enforcement Association as its Commissioner of the Year. Meyer was recognized for outstanding support of wildlife law enforcement during his tenure as FWP Commission chairman.

In presenting the award, association chair, Beate Galda, cited Meyer's leadership during the season-setting process, his concern for wardens' ability to enforce laws and regulations, and his active participation in TIP-MONT, a wildlife crimestopper's program.

Stan Meyer

The Western Wildlife Law Enforcement Association is a professional group consisting of 30 members from western states, provinces, federal agencies, and tribes.

Patrick J. Graham

Graham Honored as Outstanding Wildlife Professional

Patrick Graham, Director of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, was announced as the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' Professional of the Year at the group's annual meeting in Durango, Colorado, the week of July 12. The award is presented to an employee of a member agency for outstanding contributions to the management, protection, or enhancement of wildlife resources.

Graham was cited for:

- Designing and carrying out a fish and wildlife mitigation plan in northwestern Montana under provisions of the Northwest Power Planning Council. Graham ensured that resident fish and wildlife got a fair share of mitigation funding and saw to it that noncoastal states received consideration when it looked as if only anadromous fisheries might be addressed.
- Playing a key role in legislative efforts that resulted in authority for Montana to lease water specifically for instream fisheries.
- Establishing FWP's Family Fishing Adventures Initiative. Through this initiative, over 100 schools now have "Hooked on Fishing, not on Drugs" programs in Montana. The state has fishing equipment loaner programs, free fishing for FWP-sanctioned educational events, and numerous urban fishing opportunities.
- Supporting habitat conservation. In the six years that Graham has been director, 165,000 acres have been preserved in perpetuity for Montana's wildlife.
- In the shadow of citizen referendums threatening spring bear and lion hunting, pushing for completion and adoption of environmental impact statements to guide future management of black bears and lions.
- Championing a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement that provides long-term direction for Montana's wildlife management program.
- Working with the Governor's Private Land/Public Wildlife Committee to develop a variable-priced, outfitter-sponsored nonresident big game combination license. The license funds FWP's Block Management Program, which last year opened nearly 7.3 million acres to public hunting.

In the words of FWP Commission Chairman Stan Meyer, "Graham is particularly effective at finding common ground in dealing with difficult issues, such as those addressed in Montana's legislature and among the many interests competing for a share of Montana's valuable natural resources."

An Angler's Friend

Art Whitney

Arthur N. Whitney, an FWP fisheries biologist and administrator for 34 years, died in Helena last November of colon cancer. Born in International Falls, Minnesota, Art developed his love for the outdoors fishing, boating, and hunting near the shores of Rainy Lake. After a stint in the army in 1943-44, he attended the University of Minnesota, graduating with a B.S. in fish and wildlife management in 1949. He pursued graduate studies at the University of Minnesota in fisheries biology in 1950-51 and in administrative leadership at the University of Montana in 1962.

Art was hired by the Montana Department of Fish and Game as a district fish biologist in Miles City in 1951. He was the district fisheries manager in Missoula from 1954 until 1963, when he was promoted to chief of the Fisheries Division in Helena, a position he retired from in 1986.

Art served as president of the Western Division of the American Fisheries Society in 1971-72 and as president of the national organization from 1977 to 1978. During his tenure as administrator of the Fisheries Division, Art worked to maintain adequate instream flows for fish, protect the integrity of watercourses under provisions of the Stream Protection Act, develop public access sites for anglers, and promote wild trout management through catch-and-release regulations on heavily fished waters. He was an early proponent of identifying and preserving Montana's "fishes of special concern"—native Montana species with limited habitats or numbers. "One of our goals," he wrote in 1981, "is to see that no aquatic species—or the ecosystem that sustains it—disappears from Montana's landscape."

A PARTNERSHIP THAT WORKS!

by Pat Gunderson
Wildlife Biologist
Region 6 (Glasgow)

For over five years, conservation easements through the Habitat Montana Program have been FWP's tool of choice for habitat protection and management. Seventeen million dollars have been spent to conserve significant acreages of private wildlife habitat on easement projects across Montana. This large-scale expenditure of sportsmen's dollars may spur Montanans to ask some probing questions about the program. What have these partnerships really done to benefit wildlife, hunters, wildlife enthusiasts, and private landowners?

The first conservation easement project tackled by FWP was completed five short years ago in four counties of eastern Montana. The cornerstone of that project was the then-FWP-owned Brewer Ranch along the Powder River near Broadus. FWP offered to trade ownership of the Brewer Ranch with conservation easements attached and cash considerations to the Page-Whitham Land and Cattle Company of Glasgow in exchange for conservation easements on two Page-Whitham properties in Valley County (see *Montana Outdoors*, Sept./Oct. 1994). The South Unit is located in the Missouri River Breaks along Fort Peck Lake, while the Tampico Unit is found along the Milk River west of Glasgow. The cost to FWP to originally purchase the Brewer Ranch and consummate the Page-Whitham project was $41 per acre of private land. This ensured that critical wildlife habitat and free public hunting would be preserved forever on nearly 41,000 acres of private land. Let's take a look at what has happened since FWP and Page-Whitham joined forces five years ago.

DONALD M. JONES

As a result of a transplant program, more than 60 Merriam's turkeys inhabit the Tampico Unit.

BENEFITS TO RANCHING

The keystones of these easements are four rest-rotation grazing systems developed cooperatively by Page-Whitham, FWP, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the Department of State Lands (DSL). The two systems on the Brewer Ranch include two three-pasture systems that utilize one herd of mature cows and another that uses first-calf heifers. On the Valley County South Unit, a four-pasture system provides forage for up to 750 cow-calf pairs. In addition, the BLM, DSL, and Page-Whitham developed a three-pasture system for 1,500 yearlings. The benefits from Page-Whitham's view have been a marked increase in calf weaning weights, higher yearling weights, and the guarantee that every spring their livestock will have a full year's growth of vegetation to graze. Page-Whitham has seen weaning weight of calves and yearling weights increase an average of 28 and 44 pounds, respectively, since the rest-rotation systems were implemented. Steve Page of Page-Whitham attributes this increase to the upswing in the amount of residual cover in his pastures. He also feels that the range improvements, especially water developments, have helped fuel these weight gains.

BENEFITS TO WILDLIFE

From a wildlife perspective, thousands of acres of important sage-grasslands and prairie riparian zones have been protected from cultivation or other development. Animals using these grazing systems have exclusive use of well over 50 square miles of private lands. At any given time, cattle are confined to one-third or less of the overall area. Biologists surveyed the Brewer Ranch in 1997 and found 150 mule deer, 50 white-tailed deer, and 120 antelope on the ranch. The Valley County South Unit has seen an upswing in upland bird numbers and mule deer over the last five years. During the 1999 aerial surveys, 400 mule deer were observed wintering in this grazing system. In 1997, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation combined resources with Page-Whitham and FWP to reseed

approximately 150 acres of retired cropland on the South Unit into a grass and legume mixture. Elk and other wildlife species have made heavy use of these fields during spring green-up and throughout the summer.

Life has gotten better for wildlife using the Tampico Unit along the Milk River as well. As part of the easement, approximately 350 acres of irrigated and dryland fields were seeded to a mixture of grasses and legumes. Under the management plan, Page-Whitham harvests a hay crop from half of the fields each year after the nesting season. These fields are not only producing bumper crops of pheasants and other grassland nesting birds, but also providing the ranch with hundreds of tons of hay annually. Although the management plan for this unit allows some rotational winter livestock grazing, Page-Whitham currently is not using this grazing option. This landowner decision provides additional benefits to local wildlife through more available cover and less competition. Another important management tool is maintenance of adequate water levels on three separate oxbow reservoirs for waterfowl habitat. During aerial surveys this past winter, over 500 white-tailed deer were counted on the ranch. In January of 1997, 36 Merriam's turkeys were transplanted from the Big Timber area to this unit through FWP's turkey transplant program. As a result, more than 60 turkeys now inhabit the Tampico Unit and adjacent ranches.

Benefits to Hunters

It is clear that wildlife and landowners have benefited from these easements, but how about the folks who paid for them through the Habitat Montana Program? Probably the most telling measurement is the number of hunters using these properties. The Brewer Ranch, South Unit, and Tampico Unit began block management programs in 1988, 1989, and 1994, respectively. Since 1994, these ranches combined have averaged 1,250 hunters and 3,000 hunter days annually. The high number of hunters and hunter days can come with a price, however. Management strategies have continued to evolve in an attempt to improve hunting experiences. Road closures, limiting off-road travel to game retrieval, and quotas on number of hunters allowed daily have been used to maintain wildlife security and improve hunter satisfaction.

There are still challenges ahead for the Habitat Montana Program. The early successes have created some bottlenecks in monitoring existing easements. Even though field personnel spend a great deal of time on these ranches, FWP is currently formulating guidelines on timely and consistent easement monitoring. Limited funding can create another roadblock—the program is generating more interest by Montana landowners than can be financed. When asked about negatives from a landowner perspective, Steve Page said, "There are some things we aren't allowed to do, but we haven't had a burning need or desire to do anything that is restricted."

After five years, this first FWP conservation easement project has been positive for landowners, for recreationists, and for FWP. "A partnership that works!" is how Steve Page described Page-Whitham's relationship with FWP. The real question may be how we as Montanans can ever measure the benefits to wildlife and their habitat derived from this use of hunters dollars. Perhaps that's a task best left to the ultimate beneficiaries of the program: our children and grandchildren.

The Warden's Corner

Decoys Promote Safe Hunting and Fair Chase

by Chad Murphy
Game Warden
Region 3 (Whitehall)

In November of 1995, in response to complaints about deer spotlighting, FWP warden Jeff Darrah and I conducted a deer decoy operation in a remote forest area north of Whitehall. We met at 4 a.m. and had the decoy set up next to the roadway well before daylight. A truck soon came down the road, and when its headlights hit the decoy the vehicle came to an abrupt stop. The driver and passenger jumped out with their rifles and shot the decoy. Officer Darrah ordered, "Fish and Game! Lay down your weapons!"

After apprehending and interviewing the embarrassed individuals, we discovered that one of them had already shot a deer earlier in the season. Under questioning they admitted to spotlighting in the area for several days. Both were charged with attempting to take the decoy with the aid of artificial light, and one received an additional citation for attempting to take an over-limit of deer.

Montana began its simulated wildlife program in 1991 after several other states reported success in using decoys to apprehend violators. Studies were conducted on how to best implement the program in the field, and in 1991 the Montana Legislature enacted a new law addressing the use of simulated wildlife. The law states: "It is unlawful for a person to discharge a firearm or other hunting implement at a simulated wildlife decoy in violation of any state statute or commission rule regulating the hunting of the wildlife being simulated." Key to the law is the provision that simulated wildlife is to be treated as if it were real—i.e., the penalty for attempting to illegally take a wildlife decoy is the same as that for

illegally taking the wild animal being simulated. Violators can receive a fine as high as $1,000 and also lose their hunting privileges.

The fundamental purpose of FWP's simulated wildlife program is to apprehend blatant, willful violators. It prevents the needless loss resulting from unlawfully harvested wildlife and promotes safe hunting, fair chase, and proper hunting ethics. It also provides a substantial deterrent. Decoys are used primarily to apprehend people who are hunting before and after legal shooting hours or during closed seasons, or attempting to shoot game animals from a vehicle or public roadway.

To some, the word "decoy" conjures up images of entrapment. This is the argument often advanced by those caught in the act. However, when wardens place a decoy in the field, they have no communication with persons encountering the decoy. People who shoot the decoy do so willingly, in full knowledge that they are committing an illegal act. The decoy program simply provides the opportunity for the warden, the hunter, and the wildlife to be in the same area at the same time. In most instances, the decoy is placed in a situation where the wildlife being simulated could not be legally harvested, such as an area closed to hunting, near a road, etc. The program targets only those who willfully choose to break the law.

Through the years, decoys have been built by local taxidermists or by wardens using their own expertise. Retired game wardens from other states have also assisted us. Many of the decoys end up with names earned in the line of duty, such as "Whiplash," "Bummer," or "Smiley." Deer decoys are most commonly used, although elk, moose, antelope, bear, bobcat, mountain lion, turkey, and pheasant decoys are also available. Sportsmen's groups have supported the simulated wildlife program and have encouraged us to use it more to apprehend individuals who are ruining things for everyone else. Several of these groups have donated money to help construct and maintain the decoys, which see a lot of use. Some decoys have been shot more than 50 times. A $50 restitution fee collected from convicted violators is also used to maintain and rebuild damaged decoys.

DAVE BOOKS

Warden Chad Murphy with one of FWP's hard-working deer decoys.

The location for a decoy operation may be selected on the basis of where violations have occurred in the past or where there is an existing problem. Some areas are identified by private landowners who have experienced problems or by complaints from the public. Disturbingly, the violation rate in some locations has been as high as one out of every five vehicles encountering the decoy.

In most instances, the violation occurs within the first minute of someone spotting the decoy. These individuals do not take the time to think about what they are doing; they are concerned only about shooting an animal before it can get away. In fact, they are often so focused on shooting that they are oblivious to everything around them. On one occasion we had set up a mule deer decoy in a state park closed to hunting. A hunter stopped and was looking at the decoy through his binoculars when another individual pulled up and got out with a gun. The first man yelled, "Don't shoot! It's a decoy!" The second man shot anyway. When asked why he had shot even after being warned, he said, "I thought the guy yelled 'It's a four point!'"

Law-abiding but perplexed hunters display a variety of reactions: horn honking, rock throwing, light flashing, and shouting at the decoy are typical of people who are curious about the decoy or are just waiting to see if it will move. We've also seen real animals come within 10 feet of the decoy, apparently to satisfy their curiosity about the new guy in town.

FWP's simulated wildlife program has taken a large step toward curtailing opportunistic violations and promoting ethical hunting. While hunting is a widely accepted, time-honored tradition in Montana, it is important all hunters adhere to high standards of ethical conduct and observe the principles of fair chase. The use of simulated wildlife is one aspect of a larger effort to help hunters police their ranks and perpetuate Montana's wildlife and hunting legacy.

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Great Falls, MT 59404

Contributors

An admitted procrastinator, **Ben Long** often finds himself in line at the sporting goods store the night before elk season opens. But the hassle is more than made up for by all the smiling faces—especially the kids buying their first hunting licenses—and the feeling of excitement in the air. In "Hunting the Heart of Tradition" (p. 2), he recounts fond memories of opening day, adds historical perspective, and offers a prayer "that there will always be elk wild and free in the mountains of Montana." A free-lance writer and avid elk hunter, Long lives in Kalispell.

Keane

In a poignant reminiscence of sharing duck blinds with the same hunting buddy for 35 years, **Leo Keane** provides a blueprint for passing on the waterfowling tradition: Take a youngster hunting on Kid's Hunting Day, this year set for September 25. In "Sharing the Sunrise" (p. 8), he points out that Kid's Day affords youngsters a quality hunting experience when they are most impressionable—those first few days afield. Keane is a home-builder, birdwatcher, and long-time waterfowler from Whitefish.

Fraley

"Powerful things often come in small packages," says **John Fraley**, "and there's no better example in the animal world than the weasel." Ounce for ounce, they are Montana's most formidable carnivores. While they weigh only a fraction of a pound, they can take down and devour prey much larger than themselves. For a fascinating profile of Montana's three weasel species, turn to "Born Killers" beginning on page 13. Fraley is an information officer at FWP's Region 1 headquarters in Kalispell.

Midwesterners accustomed to finding gamebirds in heavy cover have some lessons to learn when they move West, especially when it comes to Hungarian partridge. After 13 years of chasing these unpredictable birds, **Dave Carty** concludes that "Huns Are Where You Find Them" (p. 19)—and that's usually in grassy areas near grain. Yet, he admits, some Huns live far from grainfields, and "woe to those who would make categorical statements about Hun behavior; they'll be liars before the day is done." One thing most hunters can agree on is that it's much easier to find Huns with a good dog. "For optimum results," he says, "you need an animal that is built to cover real estate." Carty is a free-lance writer who chases Huns from his home base in Bozeman.

Williams (left) and Auchly

According to **Jim Williams** and **Bruce Auchly**, tough cattle markets have forced the sale of many long-time family cattle ranches in central Montana, and rural subdivions are proliferating. That doesn't bode well for wildlife or for hunting access. One family ranch, the Harris Land and Cattle Company, has found a solution that will benefit the ranch, wildlife, and sportsmen: a conservation easement. "It will preserve our ranch as a working ranch," says Doran Lynch, whose family owns the 10,000-acre property. "And it will benefit wildlife." To learn more about the Harris Conservation Easement, which offers habitat for deer, sharp-tailed grouse, and other wildlife, as well as public hunting access, see "Mule Deer Mecca" on page 23. Williams is a wildlife biologist and Auchly is an information officer at FWP's Region 4 headquarters in Great Falls.

"I'll be starting out a new hunting dog again this fall," says **Mark Henckel**, whose old springer spaniel has retired to the couch. Each new puppy brings with it hopes and dreams—The Perfect Dog—The Dog of a Lifetime—A Real Hunting Dog. "But," he says, "when I look back at the various hunting dogs I've called my own, perfection isn't exactly what comes to mind." Family pets as well as weekend hunters, his dogs—like most dogs—had some memorable shortcomings. For a light-hearted look at Henckel's "Furry Collections of Quirks," turn to his "Perspectives" article on page 27. Henckel, who is outdoor editor for the *Billings Gazette*, lives in Park City.

MO thanks the following artists and photographers for their contributions to this issue: **Mike Barlow** and **Al DeMangelaere**, Livingston; **Denver Bryan** and **Dave Carty**, Bozeman; **Tim Christie**, Coeur d' Alene, ID; **Monte Dolack/Five Valleys Land Trust** and **Joe Elliott**, Missoula; **D. Robert Franz**, Morrison, CO; **Larry Javorsky**, Hamilton; **Donald M. Jones**, Troy; **Leo Keane**, Whitefish; **Jim Killen/ Wild Wings Inc.**, Lake City, MN; **Richard Mousel** and **Rodney Schlecht**, Great Falls; **Michael S. Quinton**, Slana, AK; **Tom J. Ulrich**, West Glacier; and **Jan L. Wassink**, Kalispell. Thanks also to **Bruce Auchly** who works for the department in Great Falls.

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